



US Should Reject Ukrainian Nuclear Blackmail

Doug Bandow

April 21, 2021

Ukraine responded to Russia's troop buildup on its border by demanding membership in NATO. However, neither the U.S. nor the Europeans, especially, are inclined to open the alliance door.

Ukraine might pocket the resulting defense guarantee and launch an offensive against the Donbass, now controlled by ethnic Russian separatists. If that led to war with nuclear-armed Russia, Kiev would then call on its new allies, most importantly America, to deal with the problem.

However, Ukraine has upped the ante. Give us what we want or we might build nuclear weapons, said one of its top diplomats. Then you'd really be sorry!

The US and Europe should call Kiev's bluff. America has no reason to defend Ukraine.

Kiev deserves America's sympathy. It's in a bad neighborhood. To paraphrase the old quip about Mexico, Ukraine is so close to Russia, so far from the rest of the world.

Worse, the country is an artificial amalgam of east and west, of nationalist and Russian heritage and language. It has enjoyed barely three decades of independence after centuries as part of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire before that. Its brief independent life has been marred by corrupt, incompetent, and malign leaders. Weakened by internal divisions, Ukraine is being pulled apart by a Russophobic diaspora that wants to make the country part of the West at any cost, even the country's destruction, and Russophile forces determined to maintain historic and traditional ties irrespective of the price paid in liberal and good governance.

These controversies keep scores of people at numerous US think tanks and advocacy organizations busy predicting doom and gloom unless Uncle Sam leaps into action, yet Ukraine's fate is largely irrelevant to America. Claims that Kiev matters to US security are self-serving fantasies. Americans got along quite well when Ukraine was part of one or another Moscow-dominated empire. Americans will do fine in the future whatever the Kiev's status.

What Ukraine is most decidedly not is worth defending. Not by Americans, anyway. Alliances, including NATO, are supposed to make members more secure, not make war more likely and deadly. Yet adding Ukraine would bring into the organization an ongoing hot conflict with a nuclear-armed power.

That would be foolish enough for Europe. Doing so would be catastrophic for the US. If Ukraine was in NATO and war happened, most member governments would immediately go on an

extended vacation. Who imagines German, Italian, or Spanish legions pouring forth to battle Russian troops in Ukraine? Their respective defense ministries would stop returning the Pentagon's phone calls. Everyone would expect Washington to do the dirty work and bear the costs.

Going to war with Moscow over Ukraine would be beyond reckless. It would violate the federal government's duty to protect Americans – their nation, including their lives, liberties, territory, and prosperity. The Founders made America's defense a fundamental obligation of the national authorities. They meant *America's* defense, not other nations, even if Americans' old ethnic homelands.

Advocates of turning Ukraine into yet another US defense dependent talk about the importance of maintaining stability in Europe. However, Washington and Brussels believe in stability only until they don't. They enthusiastically encouraged the collapse of the Soviet Union's Eastern European empire and helped blow up the Balkans generally and Serbia specifically. The US intentionally and even wantonly worked to wreck Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen at huge human cost. Washington's position is that it gets to destroy whatever it wishes geopolitically, after which it piously lectures other nations against doing the same. These hypocrisies may be great from a US standpoint but, unsurprisingly, other nations, such as Russia, are less accepting.

In 2008 the Bush administration pushed Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO. Only strong European opposition thwarted Washington's bipartisan war lobby from putting Americans at risk in two potential great conflicts. Since then whenever the issue inconveniently comes up alliance leaders like Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg tell Tbilisi and Kiev "yes, eventually" while European representatives run screaming from the room.

During the latest crisis, Ukrainian officials, from President Volodymyr Zelensky on down restated their pleas for speedy inclusion. However, no one, least of all NATO's newest members, the great and powerful states of North Macedonia and Montenegro, volunteered to be the first in line for war with Russia. So Andriy Melnyk, Ukraine's ambassador to Germany, opined: "Either we are part of an alliance like NATO and also make our contribution to strengthen this Europe, or we have only one option; to rearm ourselves." Otherwise, he asked: "How else could we guarantee our defense?"

He meant again become a nuclear power. The breakup of the Soviet Union left his nation with nuclear tipped missiles though not their launch codes. The Clinton administration brokered a deal which sent Kiev's nukes (as well as those in Kazakhstan and Belarus) back to Russia. Everyone was focused on grabbing loose nukes, not protecting the three former Soviet republics.

Some Ukrainians claimed that Washington promised to defend them in return, but the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances offered no such assurance. Rather, it bound parties to seek United Nations assistance – *United Nations assistance!* – for Ukraine if the latter faced aggression "in which nuclear weapons are used," as well as included some other commitments which together added up to doing nothing in practice. It was an inside joke that purported to give Kiev something in return for the turnover. Irrespective of the happy rhetoric, there was no chance that any American policymaker would take the US into war on Ukraine's behalf.

In any case, Kiev would find the way back to nuclear status to be difficult even if the US and Europe did not obstruct its path. If sanctioned and isolated by Washington and Brussels, the task would grow enormously difficult – think North Korea in Europe. Moreover, a Ukrainian nuclear program would risk Russian preemption, in which case the US, which invaded Iraq to stop a nonexistent nuclear program, almost certainly would not intervene.

What if Kiev nevertheless surmounted determined opposition to assemble an arsenal, along with the launch codes? Ukraine's wild political oscillations would leave friends as well as foes nervous at its possessions of nukes. Still, from America's standpoint, it would be better for such a nation to defend itself, even with nuclear weapons, than to expect America to protect it with nuclear weapons, becoming the primary target for retaliation. Defending a perpetually unstable and badly governed state against a nuclear-armed power over territorial stakes vitally important to both combatants but irrelevant to the US would be inviting catastrophe.

Americans must learn to say no. It is not this nation's purpose to be guardian of every people and territory on earth. Especially every complicated and dangerous part of it. Ukraine should not be a member of NATO. Ukraine should not receive an American security guarantee.

Ultimately, Europe, Russia, and Ukraine must work out how to share their common continent. How to do so is up to them, not Washington. Better for them to explore new compromises for peace than make new commitments for war.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.